

St. Aidan's West Epping, 15 March 2020

**“JESUS THE GIVER OF THE WATER OF LIFE”
(Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42)**

The day was hot. The sun was beating down. It was midday near the Samaritan town of Sychar. An ancient well was there, the main water supply for the town. A man was sitting near the well, resting from a long journey. He wasn't a local. In fact he was a Jew, not a Samaritan. And then, up came a woman: clearly a local from the town.

But why would a local woman be coming to the well at this hour of the day? Everyone else would come early, before the heat of the day, or perhaps towards sunset when the heat is no longer so overwhelming. As we read the story in John's Gospel, the answer suggests itself. This woman preferred to go there when no one else was around. Perhaps people would just ignore her. Perhaps they would stare, or make comments, or push past her. She may live in Sychar, but she is on the edge of the community. She is not really accepted by the people, and she prefers to endure the overbearing heat than having to gather with the women of the town, waiting for her turn to draw water for herself and her household.

But how strange it is for a Jewish man to be sitting here! Usually when a Jew travels from Judah in the south to Galilee in the north, he will take the long route along the Jordan valley to the east, and bypass Samaria in between the two regions. Jews and Samaritans have been at loggerheads for centuries, and for many Jews, travelling through Samaria would expose them to abuse or even attack by the Samaritan locals.

But then this Jewish man does something extraordinary. He asks the woman to give him a drink. Now the Samaritans were a race where Israelite and pagan ancestry were mixed together. The Samaritans rejected all the Old Testament after the five books of Moses, and they had some very strange interpretations of those books anyway. They denied the claims of Jewish people that the temple of Jerusalem was the house of God, and centred their worship on Mount Gerizim, not far away. To the Jews they were heretics, as well as an unsavoury bunch of people.

Naturally then Jews and Samaritans would avoid each other. Naturally a Jew would find it completely inappropriate to share a meal with a Samaritan, or to eat or drink from their bowls or cups.

But Jesus is not your typical Jew. With Jesus, many of the conventional boundaries that keep people apart from each other are irrelevant, in fact they are inappropriate.

John tells us in detail about Jesus' conversation with the woman. Her life, going from man to man, is a life of confusion, even darkness. And her knowledge of God and his purposes is also limited and confused. But Jesus relates to her not in a heavy-handed way, but with warmth, and with a desire to connect with her, and to bring her new life and new understanding.

Jesus **asks** the woman for some water, but he **offers** her **living** water. She thinks he is talking about running water, fresh spring water, and she wonders how he can get it. He hasn't even got a bucket! Ordinary water is good, but in due course after you have a drink, you will want some more. But the water Jesus offers is very different. Anyone who drinks the water Jesus is offering will never thirst again. The water Jesus offers brings eternal life. If he can give her that sort of water, this woman certainly wants it: she doesn't want to have to keep coming day after day to get more water to last perhaps just another day. She is intrigued by what Jesus is saying, and Jesus tells her to go and get her husband.

She tells him the truth, but certainly not the whole truth. She currently has no husband: that's correct. But Jesus knows of her five husbands, and he knows that the man she lives with now is not her husband. Now the woman is even more intrigued!

How does Jesus know this? Why would Jesus know this? Perhaps he is a prophet of God with supernatural knowledge. And so she changes the subject to theology. "Samaritans have always worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the holy city of God. You say that Jerusalem is the correct place to worship God."

Jesus tells her that the Jews **are** correct: they have true knowledge of God from the Law, read by both Jews and Samaritans, but the Jews have the clearer knowledge of God because they also read the message of the prophets. In fact God's plan of salvation, spoken about by both the Law and the Prophets, is itself being worked out through the Jews.

But as for worship, the real issue is not **where** worship takes place: this mountain or that city. The real issue is **how** people worship.

The worship God seeks is “in spirit and truth.” It is **spiritual**: it is not just a matter of carrying out a ritual, but it goes deeper, into our spirit, our very being. It is spiritual because real worship is empowered by the Holy Spirit. And it is **true**: it is the real thing, not just going through the motions. And it is true because it is based on truth, the truth about God, and especially because it is centred on Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. In Paul’s Letter to the Romans, the apostle will call his readers to true worship, which involves giving our bodies, our lives, to God in faithful service.

This is getting rather too deep for the woman now: perhaps she also feels safer with traditional worship which is not too demanding. “I know that the Messiah is coming. He will sort out all these questions for us.” Yes, the Samaritans also had an expectation of a coming Messiah, a king who would lead and save his people. But Jesus comes back with another significant claim. “I **am** the promised Messiah: I who am speaking to you now.” If we read on in the chapter we will hear how the disciples arrived back, and of course were surprised to see Jesus talking with the woman. But she goes off into town, and persuades many of the people to come back with her to see this man who knows so much about her. Could he be the promised Messiah?

Many of the townspeople listen to Jesus themselves and they are persuaded that he has a message of truth. They come to recognize that Jesus is in fact “the Saviour of the world.” This man crosses boundaries: he is a Jew, but his message is for all peoples. Like the Jews the Samaritans recognize their ancestor Abraham, and perhaps they also remember that promise of God that through Abraham people of all nations shall be blessed.

Water. How important it is. We need to drink to live. The Israelites in the wilderness became desperate when their water supply was under threat. We are only too conscious of the problems caused by drought and water shortage. Water means life.

And in offering living water, Jesus is offering the gift of eternal life. But what an unexpected person to receive Jesus’ offer! A Samaritan, not a Jew. A woman with a reputation, not a respectable person. And those Samaritans who called him the Saviour of the **world** had begun to take in the breadth of his offer of life.

Of course, the Gospel is not just for respectable people: it is for sinners – people who are not at peace with God, but who need forgiveness; people who can make no claims on the righteous God, but who need his grace, just as Paul points out in our reading from Romans. We need grace, not mere justice. Justice will point out our sin, but it will not solve the problem of sin. But as Paul says, “when we were weak, when our sins condemned us, at the right time Christ died, not for good people, but for the ungodly.” And of course, we all need the grace of God that comes to us through Jesus who died for us. And as Paul goes on to say, as we are reconciled to God through Christ’s death, so we are guaranteed salvation because Christ rose from death, and lives as our Saviour.

Living water. The gift of eternal life. We rejoice in that gift, trusting in Jesus the Saviour of the world. And we seek to worship in spirit and in truth, placing our lives in his hands, and remembering that his love reaches out to us and to all people, for our neighbour may be anyone – even a Samaritan woman with a reputation. May **we** reach out in love to those in need, to anyone needing help or friendship or a loving neighbour or even a Saviour, as Jesus has reached out to us in love. Amen

Paul Weaver